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Exclusive: Melania Trump Explains Her Style in Her Own Words

"I style myself and choose what to wear based on what I feel good in."



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BY HAYLEY PHELAN JUL 19, 2016

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Okay, so Melania may have had a bit of an originality issue at the convention last night. Many outlets have pointed out the [striking similarities](#) between Mrs. Trump's speech and the one Michelle Obama gave at the Democratic National Convention in 2008. But if her words weren't *entirely* her own, her outfit certainly was.

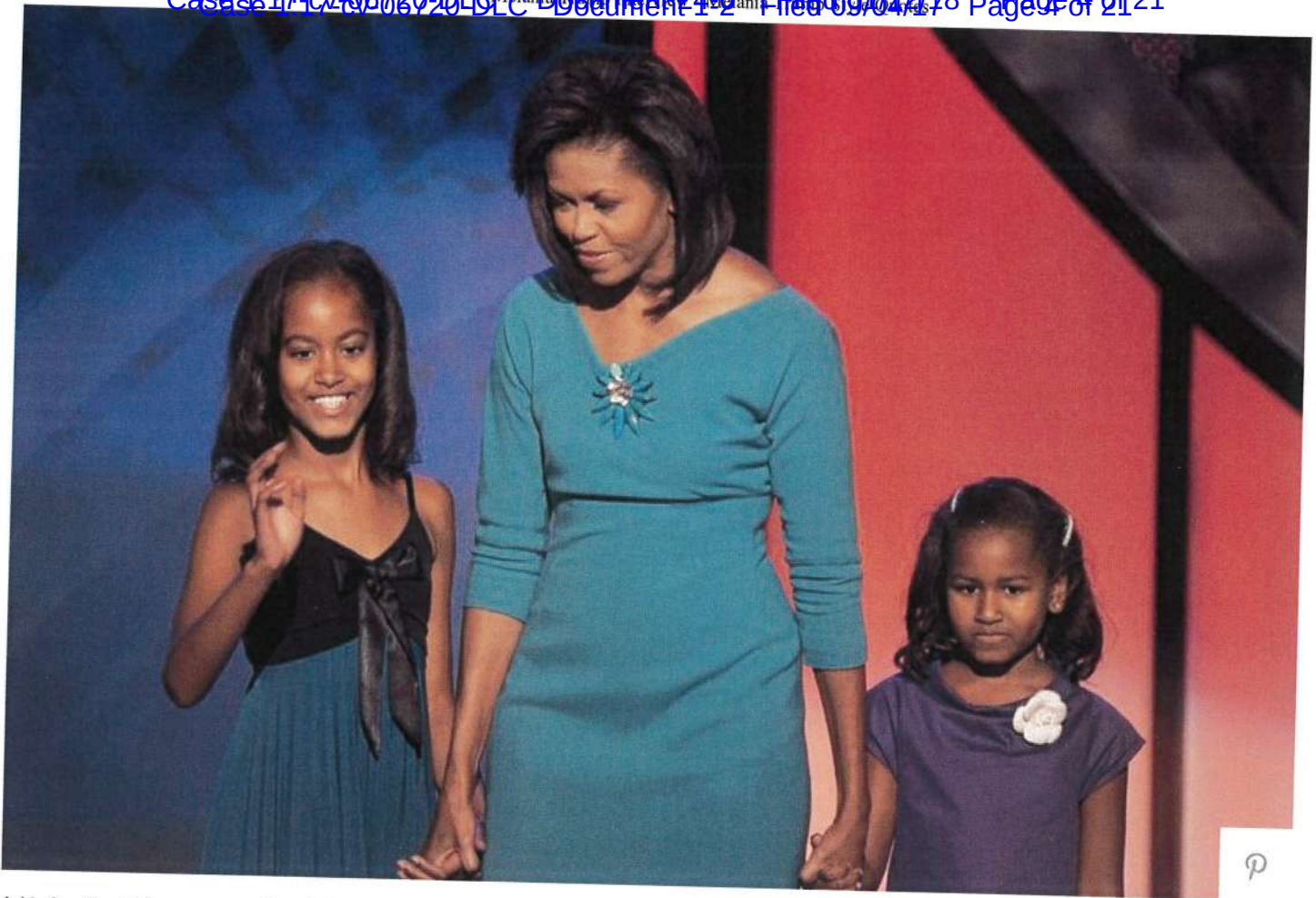
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Melania Trump at the Republican National Convention

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For her biggest primetime appearance to date, Mrs. Trump wore a form-fitting white dress with bell sleeves by Roksanda—the eponymous label of Serbian-born, London-based designer Roksanda Ilincic. The dress, which [retails](#) for around \$1,500, broke convention in a number of ways—most notably that it was not designed by an American. (Samantha Cameron, wife of former U.K Prime Minister David Cameron, is also a fan of the label.) The dress also strayed considerably from the staid styles usually favored by political wives; compare it, for instance, to the teal Maria Pinto shift dress which Michelle Obama wore at the 2008 DNC, which had a more traditional silhouette.



Michelle Obama at the 2008 Democratic National Convention

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The RNC look stayed true to the unorthodox style sensibility Mrs. Trump has cultivated throughout her public life. When I asked Mrs. Trump about the challenges of dressing for the campaign over email, she told me: "I don't find it to be challenging. I style myself and choose what to wear based on what I feel good in it." (According to [WWD](#), Mrs. Trump bought her convention speech dress herself from Net-a-Porter.) The message seems to be that, like her husband, Melania plays by her own rules.



Donald and Melania Trump in March; Melania is wearing a Roland Mouret dress and carrying a Bottega Veneta clutch.

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Last night, says Patsy Cisneros, an LA-based political image consultant, she was successful. "I thought she looked beautiful and fashionable," says Cisneros. According to Cisneros, white was a smart choice: "Very few people can wear white on television," she says. "But because she's so statuesque, it worked. It filled her out, rather than emphasizing how tall and thin she is." The palette—most likely off-white or cream, given that pure white can come off as clinical—along with the rounded cuffs had the effect of tempering what some critics have called Mrs. Trump's "ice queen" quality, according to Cisneros. "It softened her," says Cisneros.



Melania Knauss and Donald Trump at Cipriani's in 1999.

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In the past, Mrs. Trump's fashion choices have tended to fall somewhere between sexy and extravagant—a far cry from what we've come to expect from political wives, to say nothing of *conservative* political wives. Remember, this is the woman whose wedding gown—a frothy custom-made Dior—cost [a reported \\$100,000](#) . She's come a long way since then, says Beth Dincuff Charleston, part-time assistant professor of fashion history at Parsons and an expert on first lady style.

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Melania and Donald Trump in April; Melania wears a Valentino coat and Christian Louboutin shoes.

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"Her style has matured," says Dincuff Charleston. "I think it's gotten a little more in line with what we think of as first lady style." One major shift in Mrs. Trump's wardrobe, according to Dincuff Charleston, is that it's gotten less revealing. "I don't think we'll ever see her in those babydoll dresses she used to wear," said the professor, referring to the revealing mini-dresses Mrs. Trump favored in the aughts. In fact, you could probably chart Trump's political ambitions via his wife's cleavage: The closer she gets to the White House, the more covered-up she seems to get.

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Melania Trump in 2005

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Yet, when asked how her look has evolved, Mrs. Trump said there's been little shift. "My style has stayed pretty consistent over the years," she told me. "I always wear what I like and what is appropriate for the occasion." As Mrs. Trump tells it, her main concern when getting dressed is her own personal comfort. Most political wives don't work with stylists, but then most political wives aren't married to billionaires.



Donald and Melania Trump in April; Melania wears a dress by Giambattista Valli.

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Regardless of who is making the decisions, a First Lady's appearance is, for better or worse, the subject of endless scrutiny. That means, according to Dincuff Charleston, Trump might want to downplay the bombshell archetype from which she's emerged. The former model is undeniably sexy (her husband once told Howard Stern that her breasts "were important" for their relationship)—yet Americans, for better or worse, don't seem to want a va-va-voom first lady. Republicans, especially, do not seem to want their politician's wives to look sexy. Remember when right-wingers made a big deal about Michelle Obama going sleeveless, in what Jezebel dubbed "Armgate"?



Michelle Obama's first official photo as First Lady.

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For Melania, that would mean fewer strapless dresses and plunging necklines. The white strapless Elizabeth and James dress that she wore to her husband's presidential announcement, for instance, now feels a little "inappropriate," according to Dincuff, given that First Lady-hood is a viable possibility. What's more, it seems out of step with the rest of the



covered up than her," notes Dincuff Charleston. "She looked out of place."



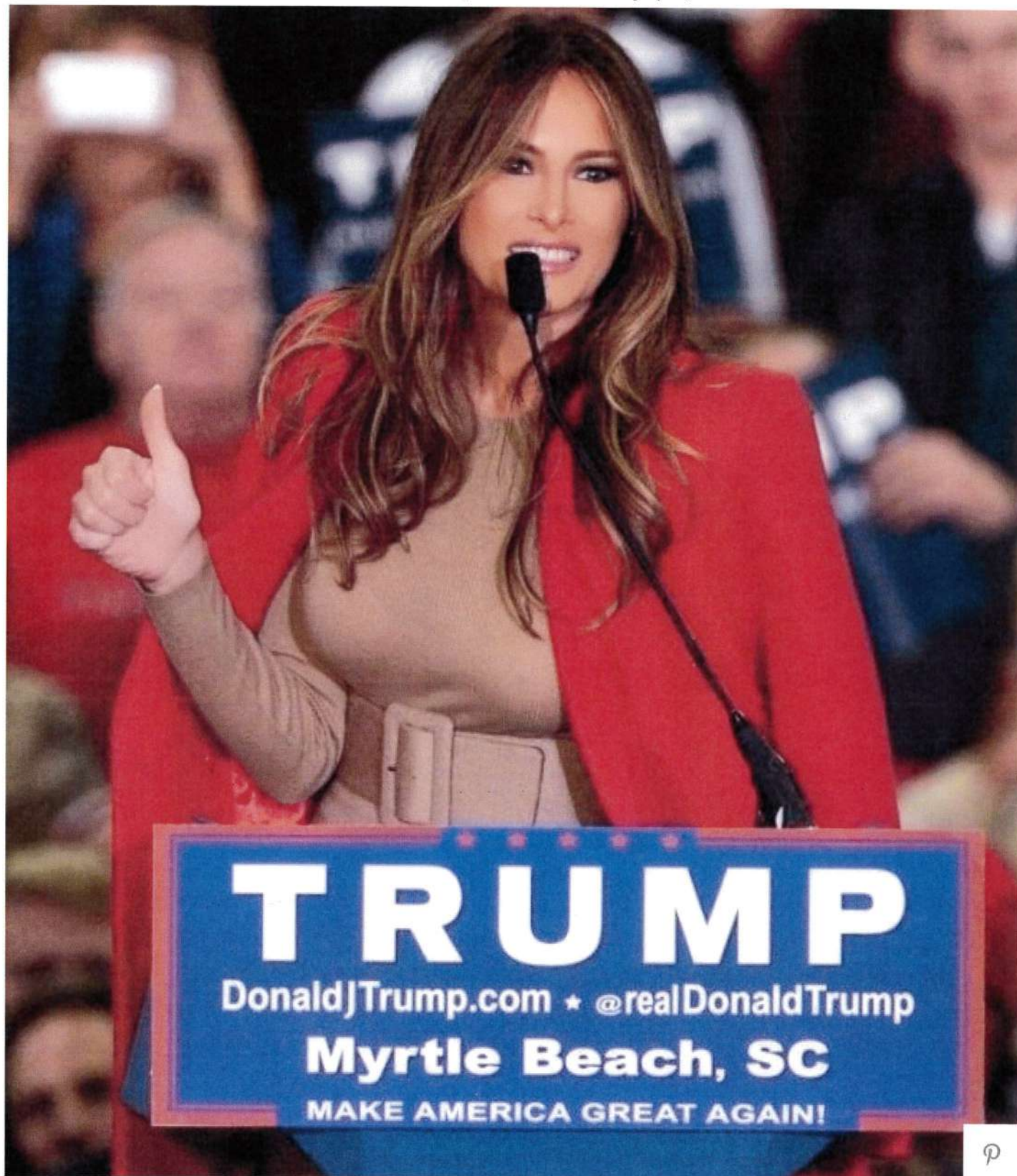
Donald Trump and family at the announcement of his candidacy; Melania Trump wears an Elizabeth and James dress.

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Perhaps Mrs. Trump's unconventional wardrobe choices—especially early in the campaign—reveal what many political pundits have already guessed: that she never exactly expected to be First Lady. But as the prospect looms closer, she seems to be rejiggering her image. Last night's offbeat outfit notwithstanding, "she's started playing it really safe in shift dresses and jackets," says Dincuff Charleston. "It's sort of a fashion editor, power-woman look."

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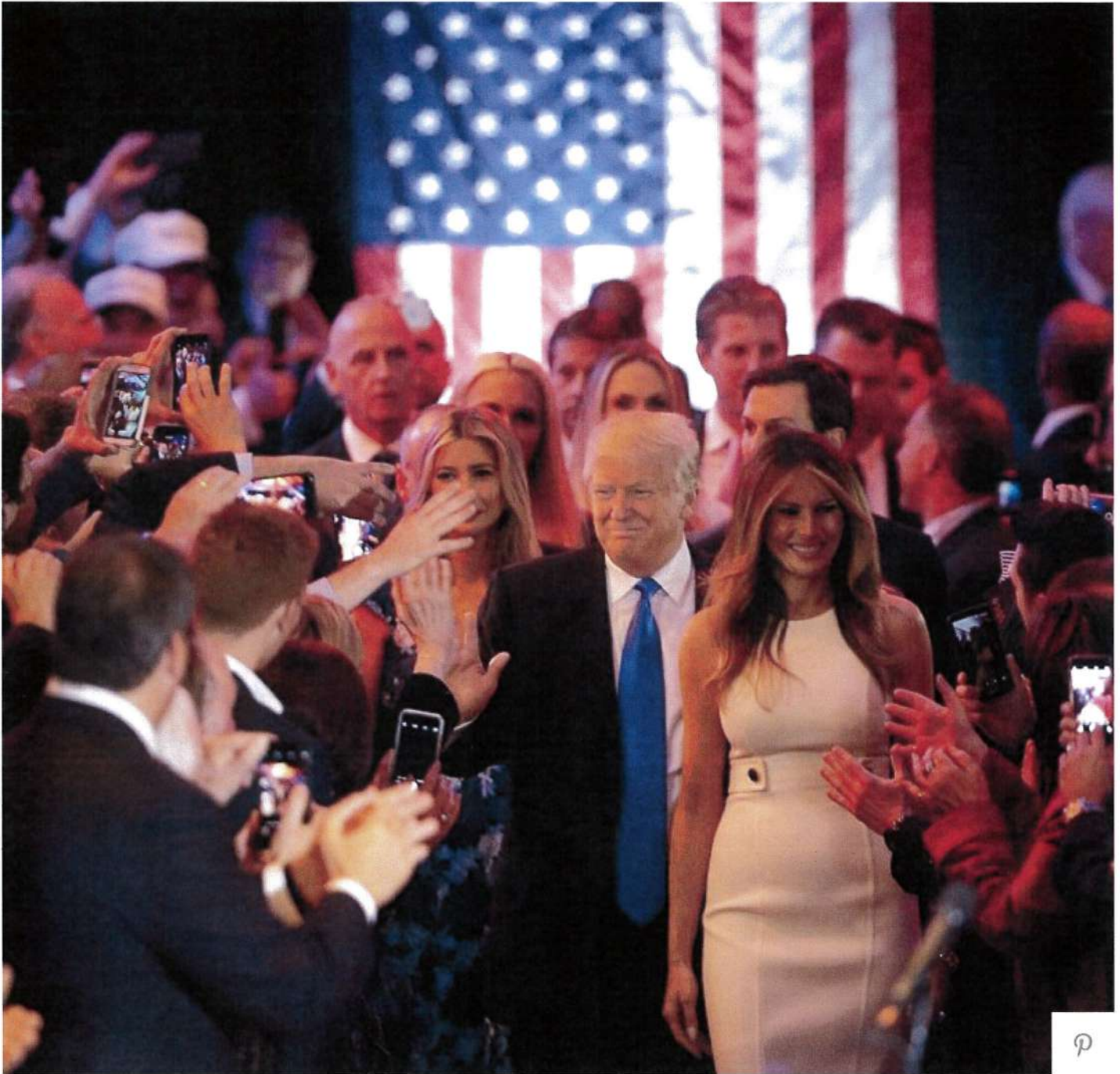
Mrs. Trump has been noted for wearing what in some circles is called the "[editor's cape](#)" i.e., when a jacket is draped over the shoulders. The look, says Dincuff Charleston, "gives her a strong shoulder—which telegraphs power—without being out of date," she said. See the ensemble Mrs. Trump wore at the Iowa caucuses: red Michael Kors coat draped over a red Victoria Beckham dress. "That was one of her best looks," said Dincuff Charleston. Another



Melania Trump in her editor's cape"; she is wearing a Michael Kors coat, Bill Blass skirt and belt, and Michael Kors top.

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"In the past, she's worn a lot of pastel, which looks great with her skin tone but can make her look too soft," said Dincuff Charleston. With their evocation of lingerie and youth, pastels are probably not Melania's friend at this juncture—particularly since she, like her husband, has a hard time being taken seriously in some more serious political circles. "She needs more business colors," said Dincuff Charleston. At her recent appearances, Melania has stuck to bold primary colors or white. Indeed, she told me: "I'm always focused on pieces that have superior cut and I tend to like color."



Donald and Melania Trump on the night of the Indiana Primary; Melania wears a dress by Michael Kors.

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Ironically, it's the ostensibly enviable elements of Mrs. Trump's life—a former model, married to a billionaire—that could wind up working against her. Dincuff Charleston notes that Melania might feel more relatable if she occasionally appeared more casual. "I'd love to see her in a cardigan and skirt, with her hair pulled back," said Dincuff Charleston. It might also work well for Mrs. Trump to nod to her Slovenian roots: "Nothing over the top," Dincuff Charleston

page Mrs. Trump could take from Middleton's playbook: Mixing lower-priced and contemporary items in with her designer items.

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Cisneros, on the other hand, suggests Mrs. Trump look to another Princess. "I would recommend to her to try to emulate Princess Diana," she says. "Melania doesn't need to be this big, gregarious personality. Diana was also shy, but she had a natural ease, a natural warmth to her—that's what Melania should be striving for." As a trained model, Melania looks good in static situations, but, says Cisneros, she seems to struggle for live-action charisma: "I wished she had smiled fully, to bring more warmth to her mouth and eyes." If she makes it to the White House, she'll have to unlearn some habits, most notably, says Cisneros, her propensity for squinting. "I don't know if it's her Zoolander look, or if it's the bright lights, but she stays in that squinty look quite often," she says. "I wished she had opened her eyes, *really* opened her eyes," says Cisneros.

All this being said, it appears likely that Mrs. Trump is going to continue to wear what she likes. Like her husband, it seems, she has little intention of bowing to convention—and, like her husband, maybe that will work in her favor after all.

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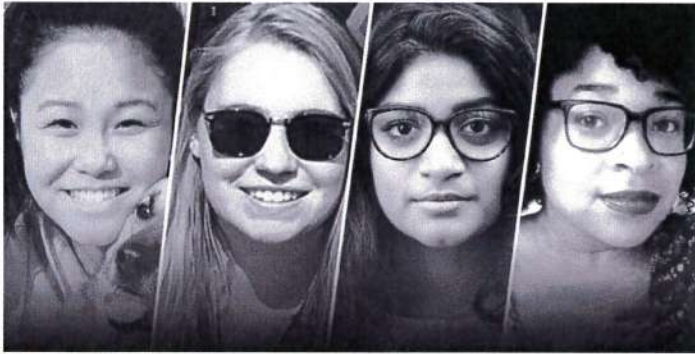


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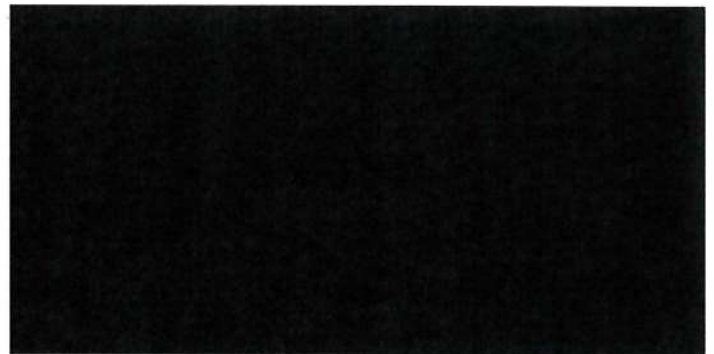
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